

Prologue: A First-Year Writing Journal

Volume 6

Article 6

2014

Critical Essay: Zora Neale Hurtson's What White Publishers Won't Print in Comparison to the Television Shows "Good Times" and "The Cosby Show"

Kalyn Dunkins
Denison University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/prologue>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dunkins, Kalyn (2014) "Critical Essay: Zora Neale Hurtson's What White Publishers Won't Print in Comparison to the Television Shows "Good Times" and "The Cosby Show"," *Prologue: A First-Year Writing Journal*: Vol. 6 , Article 6.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/prologue/vol6/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Denison Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Prologue: A First-Year Writing Journal by an authorized editor of Denison Digital Commons.

Critical Essay: Zora Neale Hurston's *What White Publishers Won't Print* in Comparison to the Television Shows "Good Times" and "The Cosby Show"
By Kalyn Dunkins

In the essay *What White Publishers Won't Print* by Zora Neale Hurston, expressions of both concern and subtle anger are presented over the fact that White publishers will only print Black literature if it is based in the content of racial stereotypes, struggle, and tension of some kind. This essay will bring light to why certain media would have been more or less likely accepted during her time period (the Harlem Renaissance) due to the amount of impoverishment expressed or lack thereof.

Two popular television shows of the 20th Century, both televised after Hurston's essay was written (*Good Times* and *The Cosby Show*), have a Black family as the main characters. These two families, however, differ in how they are represented on television as far as the setting in which the family lives goes, the financial background of the family, the expressed dialect used in each family, and so forth. So, although both families are Black, the details previously listed are crucial in determining whether or not these shows would have been allowed for publication if they were written around the time Hurston published her essay.

Hurston herself is the author of the famous novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Within that novel, there are clear demonstrations of racial bias, tension, and struggle throughout the chapters with most of the main characters presented. The main character, Janie, has features that aren't particularly considered "Black" (her flowing hair and perfect skin) and a woman she meets shows favor to her over other women because of this. Also, towards the end of the novel after a hurricane occurs, many people must be buried. The buriers are instructed to put the bodies of white people in nice wooden boxes and to only throw the bodies of black people in whatever

hole they can dig. Some may argue that she is being hypocritical in her essay *What White Publishers Won't Print* because she herself wrote about the exact things she was arguing against, or it can also be argued that her essay was a cry for change so that she wouldn't have to present such racial tensions in her novels just to get them published.

Good Times, was first televised in 1974. The show consists of a family of five, who reside in a small projects apartment in Chicago: Florida Evans and James Evans, Sr., the heads of the household, along with their three children James "J.J." Evans, Jr., Michael Evans, and Thelma Evans. This show was a spin-off of the previous sitcom *Maude*, where Florida played a house maid for a white family and "James" (then known as Henry) played a firefighter, both still married, but living in New York. Florida quits her job as a maid because Henry gets a raise and they both move to Chicago, thus presenting *Good Times*, where Henry is now known as James. Scenarios like the one previously described seem unlikely, in the sense that many would not expect that a man of color would get a raise and have the ability to move on to "better" life so quickly if his lifestyle wasn't very well financially developed to begin with. This idea, during Hurston's time period, would have to have been edited or downplayed in order for it to seem believable enough for life in that era.

At the start of *Good Times*, the show was primarily based on showing family struggles but the ability to make it through these struggles with uses of humor. However, as the show progressed, more and more of the comical aspect turned into mockery of the Black community as a whole which eventually caused cancellation of the show in 1979 after six consecutive seasons, primarily due to complaints of producers and the cast themselves (Spadoni). Contrastingly, if these comical remarks were to be continuously and repetitively made during Hurston's time period, it is arguable that there would not have been a problem with them based on the belief at

the time that this sort of presentation of Black people and their community was more “relatable” as far as the majority of the non-Black general public was concerned.

One of the episodes entitled “The Family Gun” features the Evans family having to ensure security of their home due to Florida’s purse being stolen, along with other crimes that have been accumulatively committed throughout the projects (Lear). At one point, J.J. has to unlock their front door in order to let Willona, Florida’s best friend, into the apartment. The door consists of six extra locks apart from the one built-in with the door to emphasize the need for security within the home. Although the audience laughs hysterically as J.J. unlocks the door, mind you, with a goofy grin planted across his face, the humor of the matter draws away the seriousness of it. The humor placed in the episode can in a way only encourage Whites not to care since it appears that Blacks don’t really care about the issue either.

Further along within the episode, Willona and Florida make an imaginary check-list of the things they need before going down to the laundry room. One of these items is a police whistle. Michael comments, “What’s the use? You whistle and the police don’t come! ... All those locks on the door or not being able to go down to the laundry room without protection? This is no way to live” (Lear). Typically, a white family of that era wouldn’t have to have taken such drastic measures to keep themselves protected. This scene in the episode magnifies how crime between Blacks was more likely to be frowned upon, or more commonly broadcasted in negative light of the race as a whole, though I’m sure crimes between Whites occurred similarly. Hurston’s argument is that the noted discrimination between Whites’ ways of living and Blacks’ has caused the two groups to be looked at with bias, favor given towards Whites. Because of this bias, it is expected for Blacks to have to deal with the burden of having to overprotect themselves due to the culture that Whites believe they have created for and by Blacks themselves.

If these scenes were presented during Hurston's time period, reviewers would probably give the author the "proper" praise and accolades for portraying the quote-unquote common Black struggle within impoverished Black communities in such an artistic matter. Readers would, apparently, love to hear more about the struggle of the family rather than the support and encouragement displayed in other episodes. J.J. is also a student at an art institute and Thelma is pursuing a career in dance and singing. These attributes would most likely be cut out of a novel if presented during Hurston's time period because of the quote-unquote unrealistic positivity that is shown in the children's upbringing.

The Cosby Show, contrastingly, isn't very similar to *Good Times* at all, besides the fact that both families are Black. The Huxtables are a family of seven in the show, who all live in Brooklyn, New York: Heathcliff "Cliff" Huxtable and Clair Hanks-Huxtable, the heads of the household, and their five children Sondra Huxtable-Tibideaux, Denise Huxtable, Theodore "Theo" Huxtable, Vanessa Huxtable, and Rudith "Rudy" Huxtable. Cliff is an obstetrician and Clair is a lawyer. Their oldest daughter, Sondra, had already successfully finished both high school and college prior to the show being aired. Obvious differences between the shows are apparent as early as the given names in the characters of *The Cosby Show*; *Huxtable* and *Tibideaux* don't typically portray the surnames of Black families, even if the mention of Cliff's and Clair's occupations (assumingly uncommonly prestigious for Black parents of that time) was left out. If these characters were to be placed somewhere within a written text like a novel, the reader—just from reading their last names—would most likely believe that the storyline is based on a well-off, middle class White family. Even still, if it is mentioned that the family and the characters are Black, the reader would probably have to continuously remind themselves of this fact because stereotypically this was considered uncommon. Although Cliff is throughout the

show a bit goofy with his children and his wife, this characterization seems to work better for him rather than with J.J. of “Good Times” because of his intellectual and financial status, involvement, and background.

One of the episodes entitled “I’m ‘In’ with the ‘In’ Crowd,” Vanessa goes over to a friend’s house for a small get-together and she and her other friends are peer pressured into playing a drinking game. Vanessa is the only one who shows long-lasting reluctance to join in the game. This aspect may not have been seen as “relatable” during Hurston’s time period because of the assumption that Blacks are untamed children that are not given any of the values or moral teachings that Vanessa expressed. Drunken Vanessa is brought home by her older sister Denise in secret, but Cliff and Clair find out about Vanessa’s wrongdoing and punish her for it. This may be seen only as a “White” parenting if it were presented during Hurston’s period because it is assumed that during this time Blacks as parents let their children run wild and do whatever they please with no strict guidelines, boundaries, or rules.

Further along in the episode when Heath and Clair discuss what happened with Vanessa, Theo makes a comment about how much pressure it is to be a Huxtable and that may have been a reason why she was drinking. He says, “Because of what you two have achieved, the whole world expects a lot much more from us than other kids.... Think about it, Dad, you’re a doctor. Mom’s a lawyer. That’s a lot of pressure.” Clair responds to him by saying, “But we’ve never said to you, ‘Son become a doctor, become a lawyer.’ We say, ‘Go to school,’ we say, ‘Study,’ we say, ‘Become whatever you want.’” This would also typically be seen as “White” parenting because during Hurston’s time period it was preconceived that Blacks as parents did not guide their children as displayed by the Huxtable parents in this episode and throughout the entire show. If these qualities were to be presented as the norm during Hurston’s period without any

background information given concerning the characters' race, it is perceived that one might assume this family was White.

The critics of both shows, *Black* and *White*, had positive and negative feedback as far as character portrayal was concerned, as well as how believable it was considered to society at the time. Critics of *Good Times* believe that the series' portrayal of traditional parents who instilled positive morals and values within their children, all while living in the Chicago projects where crime and unemployment were extremely prevalent, was one of the more constructive aspects of the television series. However, once the show became more comical and not taken as seriously as it had been from the beginning, ratings dropped. Esther Rolle (who played Florida) complained to *Ebony* magazine about how the producers, writers, and directors dumbed-down J.J.'s characterization. She stated "that says to black kids that you can make it by standing on the corner saying 'Dyn-O-Mite'! J.J. is eighteen and he doesn't work. He can't read or write. The show didn't start out to be that. Little by little...they have made J.J. more stupid.... Negative images have been quietly slipped in on us through the character of the oldest child" (Spadoni). John Amos (who played James) also, though not as publicly, expressed his distaste for the writers' portrayal of J.J. throughout the series. He felt that the writers would rather have J.J. "prance around saying 'DY-NO-MITE!.' and that way they could waste a few minutes and not have to write meaningful dialogue." The complaint brought up by Amos caused him to be fired and killed off the series. Rolle only agreed to return to the show for filming if she was given higher salary, required to recite more meaningful dialogue, and if J.J.'s character was forced to become more responsible (Spadoni).

The ruckus was over whether or not the portrayal of J.J. as a young Black male may or may not have been as much of a problem for White producers during that time. This is just the

type of material the publishers looked for in Hurston's argument and wanted embedded within the writings of Black literature because it seemed to be more "realistic" and "made more sense," versus having a family express and show love and support for one another.

Critics of *The Cosby Show* were more torn and not as one-sided about their opinions about the show, opposed to how critics of *Good Times* were. Many people who watched the show, critic or not, admired the positive light shone on Black families. Bill Cosby was praised for his crafty and creative ability to show only a small portion of the Black population that was barely notable for the rest of the country during that time and his portrayal of Blacks who were well-educated and successful broke the traditional racial stereotypes. The show enabled audience members to feel better about themselves and possibly prouder to be Black. "[P]ersistent struggles against domination are displaced and translated into celebrations of black middle class visibility and achievement," stated Herman Gray in his book, *Television, Black Americans, and the American Dream* (Budd and Steinmann).

Aside from his accreditation, Cosby was ridiculed by some critics due to the lack of realism he demonstrated in the show. Cosby's demonstration for some to U.S. whites is that they "no longer feel blacks are discriminated against in the schools, the job market and the courts" (Budd and Steinmann). Of course, even in the 1980s after the Civil Rights movement, that was not the case—it's not even the case *today*, though the activity of it is so much more hush-hush—so it is understandable for the general public to have been upset with Cosby's limited depiction of Black families at the time. Furthermore, another critic stated, "There is very little connection between the social status of black Americans and the fabricated images of black people that Americans consume each day" (Budd and Steinmann). If Bill Cosby were a white man, if the Huxtables were white, this would not have been an issue at all. Cosby was stripped from feeling

good about doing something good simply because he didn't abide by the stereotypical presentation of a struggling, impoverished Black family. If he had decided to be an author rather than write a show for television, his novel would not have been published.

The comparisons of the three presented texts, Hurston's *What White Publishers Won't Print*, Lear's *Good Times*, and Cosby's *The Cosby Show*, are all in correlation to each other of how picky and stereotypical race relations were in the mid- to late-20th Century, no matter that one piece was criticizing book publication of Black literature and the other two were demonstrating television portrayal of Black families. *Good Times* would have succeeded well as a novel instead of a television show because of the stereotypes and comical remarks presented about Blacks, whereas *The Cosby Show* wouldn't have been accepted as the novels during Hurston's time period if the characters were to stay Black instead of white.

Works Cited

- Budd, Mike and Steinmann, Clay. "White Racism and The Cosby Show." *Jump Cut* 37 (1992): 5-12. *Jump Cut: A Review of Contemporary Media*. Web. 14 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.ejumpcut.org/archive/onlinessays/JC37folder/Cosby.html>>.
- Cosby, Bill. "I'm 'In' with the 'In' Crowd." *The Cosby Show*. NBC. 5 Oct. 1989. *YouTube*, 22 Feb. 2014. Web. 13 Apr. 2014. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A8DM7JyfQo0>>.
- Hurston, Zora N. "What White Publishers Won't Print" 1950. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. 2nd ed. New York: W.W. Norton &, 2010. 1023-027. Print.
- Lear, Norman. "The Family Gun." *Good Times*. CBS. 16 Sept. 1975. *YouTube*. Crackle, 11 Oct. 2013. Web. 14 Dec. 2013. <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2ApPvCp7I1Q>>.
- Spadoni, Mike. "Good Times | A Television Heaven Review." *Good Times | A Television Heaven Review*. N.p., Jan. 2003. Web. 12 Dec. 2013.